



Body Language Bible

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Introduction

This resource is intended as a sort of thesaurus for body language, to suggest traits that might be associated with characters expressing a particular emotion. Sometimes, there are multiple, often contradictory ways that an emotion might express itself, so a writer will need to pick what suits their character's overarching personality. This resource is intended as a springboard for ideas rather than a definitive list of emotions / body language traits – often, the best body language references are the ones that are truly unique dependent on situation, character and story.



AFRAID

Facial Expressions

Breathing – possibly hyperventilating

Eyes – unblinking, wide (making sure they don't miss something important); or inability to look (so, keeping eyes screwed shut or turning away); avoids making eye contact; perhaps a wide-eyed stare; perhaps desperately searching for a way out; possibly crying

Eyebrows – raised

Eyelids – lower eyelid tensed

Forehead – tensed or furrowed; perhaps sweating

Mouth – partially open or clenched tightly shut; maybe forcing a smile; mumbling; possibly screaming, or voice high-pitched

Nose – nostrils flared

Skin – pale; or possibly flushed

Body and Posture

Hands – twisting, making fists, clenching and unclenching, keeping them hidden

Heart – racing

Muscles – tensed / a statue

Shoulders – perhaps slouched; body generally curled up (the desire to keep themselves safe or to retreat inside themselves)

General

Hands gripping opposite shoulders or otherwise crossing of arms (an attempt to create a barrier between themselves and the object of fear); shrinking away from others; perhaps creating other physical barriers (placing an object between themselves and the object of fear) or backing away (like an animal caught within a trap)

Clumsy, hurried movements

If fight or flight kicks in, they might become more aggressive with shoulders pulled back, standing tall and making themselves seem bigger than they are

Jumping at unexpected noises or movements

Perhaps clasping hands behind head; rubbing the muscles at the back of their neck; hugging themselves or other gestures associated with self-comfort



ANGRY

Facial Expressions

Breathing – deep breaths if trying to control anger; or shallow, rapid breathing might be a sign of strong emotion

Eyes – intense eye contact, staring, perhaps squinting; rolling eyes (annoyance)

Eyebrows – lowered towards eyes

Forehead – furrowed if anger is particularly intense

General – if trying to control anger, they might be deadpan

Mouth – clenched jaw or teeth; perhaps grinding teeth; or baring teeth; perhaps pinched together lips; or a tight-lipped smile; perhaps lips flaring outwards; perhaps pulling lips inwards; or frowning; perhaps jaw is quivering; perhaps a scowl

Nose – flared nostrils

Skin – possibly a colour in their cheeks if they have lighter skin tone; reddened skin

Voice – raised voice; or perhaps intensely quiet, enunciating their words; words spat out one by one

Body and Posture

Arms – moving away from body

Hands – clenched fists; perhaps one hand in a fist, the other wrapped around it; perhaps cracking knuckles; perhaps pointing at the object of their anger; if trying to control their anger, possibly covering their mouth with their hand

Muscles – tensed up, especially in their body (preparation for a fight); clenching of abdominal muscles

Neck – tensed; veins throbbing

Position – square on to the object of their anger

Shoulders – pulled back; making themselves look bigger than they are

General

Lashing out at nearby objects; perhaps punching objects / walls / the palm of their other hand / their thighs; perhaps banging a table if seated; maybe throwing things

Possibly pacing; showing other signs of energy build-up

If mild anger, perhaps sighing or huffing out breath

Possibly sweating more than usual

If trying to control their anger, possibly standing very still



Facial Expressions

Eyes – won't maintain eye contact; downcast eyes; darting eyes; perhaps blinking back tears

Mouth – pinched in; a straight line

Voice – stammering

Body and Posture

Arms – perhaps hugging themselves

Back – curved; hunched over

Hands – perhaps covering their face or shielding their eyes

Head – bowed

Neck – shrunken as head is lowered into body

Posture – taking up less space; making themselves small (as if they want to hide)

Shoulders – possibly raised; body generally quite hunched

General

Moving away from others; recoiling at touch



ATTRACTED

Facial Expressions

Eyes – dilated pupils; focus on object of attraction; stealing glances towards the object of attraction

Mouth – smiling; perhaps slightly open, suggestive; maybe wetting lips; pulling lips inwards before releasing

Skin – perhaps flushed; blushed

Voice – perhaps higher pitched than normal (if nervous) or stumbling over words; a man might purposefully lower his voice to appear more 'manly'; women might move their voice to a slightly higher register – attempting to make themselves stand out, at a different pitch, especially in a crowded environment

Body and Posture

Back – sitting / standing with a straight spine

Chest – jutting out; generally trying to appear more physically impressive

Hands – palms outwards to show they are someone who can be trusted

Heart – racing; fluttering

Posture – angled in towards object of attraction; open stance

Shoulders – pulled back

General

Possibly sweating

Finds excuses to touch object of attraction; brushing / grazing fingers against their arm, reaching across to them; seeking other ways to get closer

Removes barriers between themselves and object of attraction

Laughing at jokes, perhaps too loudly, exaggerated

Perhaps playing with hair or fiddling with nearby objects; perhaps rearranging themselves to put their best face forwards, trying to bring attention to something that they think makes them attractive

Mirroring behaviour; mimicking the movement and mannerisms of the object of attraction

Goes out of their way to extend conversations or interactions; asks a lot of questions



Facial Expressions

Eyes – dilated; a blank stare; heavy but not quite closed eyelids; perhaps stretching out eyes in an effort to concentrate

Mouth – yawning (note: this is an infectious body language trait that might spread to others in the vicinity)

Face – generally drooping

Body and Posture

Feet – tapping; pointed towards the exit signalling a desire to leave

Hands – drumming fingers in an up and down pattern; or tapping their forefinger on their thigh or against a table / desk

Head – drooping to the side, angled down; if sat, they might have their head rested on one or both hands; perhaps moving head from side to side

Legs – crossed; bouncing / partially kicked foot

Posture – slouched; sagging; leaning forwards rather than backwards; possibly leaning against a wall if stood, or supporting themselves in a different manner; general body position pointed towards the exit signalling a desire to leave

General

Yawning; sighing; huffing

Fidgeting – scratching, playing with objects in their vicinity, clicking a pen, twirling hair; doodling; pulling at ears

Restlessly moving in their seat

Checking the time – watch; clock

Attempting to move things along in a conversation, perhaps making a circling motion with their hand or interjecting to make the speaker jump to the point



CONFIDENT

Facial Expressions

Breathing – controlled and steady

Chin – raised

Eyes – maintains eye contact; eyes kept quite wide

Mouth – smiling widely on first greeting and at key points; otherwise, a more natural smile / neutral expression

Voice – unrushed, doesn't stumble over words, very few hesitations; loud without being over-loud; pitch is slightly lower than average but with pitch variation; speaks slightly faster than average

Body and Posture

Arms – by sides (hanging relaxed) or perhaps hands clasped together behind back; generally, not crossed (since this creates a barrier)

Back – straight; standing tall

Chest – pushed out

Feet – between four to six inches apart; directed towards the object of their attention

Hands – always visible; not in pockets (although perhaps thumbs might be hooked in pockets with fingers hanging down) or hidden behind objects or behind their back; perhaps steepling hands

Head – lifted up; tipped slightly back

Muscles – relaxed; not rigid

Posture – legs aligned with shoulders; body turned towards others

General

Direct, purposeful movements; assertive in action and speech

Comfortable with taking up space; possibly sitting with legs spread wide apart; makes themselves seem physically bigger

Gestures with palms out; or perhaps the ok gesture (rather than pointing)

Mirroring others

If nodding, a single purposeful nod rather than multiple 'bobblehead' nods; also, perhaps a triple nod (like an ellipsis)

When standing, weight distributed evenly on both legs

Body tends to be arranged in a symmetrical fashion – so a straight line up through the body with legs and arms symmetrical either side, head perfectly straight



CONFUSED

Facial Expressions

Breathing – exhaling forcefully through mouth or nose; or breathing in and letting the breath out slowly if trying to understand the situation

Forehead – furrowed; eyebrows knitted together

Mouth – lips bunched to one side; biting lower lip; perhaps opening and closing their mouth without speaking (like a guppy fish)

General – frowning

Voice – sentences rising up in a question at the end; perhaps mirroring the words used by other characters; generally questioning the truth of the situation

Body and Posture

Head – tilted to one side

Shoulders – shrugging

Posture – if sitting, perhaps resting chin on a fist or the palm of their hand

General

Scratching chin or behind ear

Perhaps looking around themselves for answers



Facial Expressions

Eyes – squinting

Eyebrows – tensed and pulled down towards eyes

Mouth – tight lips

Nose – wrinkled; perhaps covering nose with a hand or pinching the bridge of their nose

Body and Posture

Muscles – tensed

Neck – possibly hunched down into body

Shoulders – tendency to raise

General

Flinching at any sudden movement

Body turned away from object of disgust

Perhaps gagging



Facial Expressions

Eyes – keeps looking away; eyes darting in different directions

Mouth – biting a thumb, knuckle or lip

Body and Posture

Posture – weight on one leg; unbalanced

General

Fidgeting with nearby objects; twiddling hair; drumming fingers

Scratching chin or behind ear



Facial Expressions

Eyebrows – one eyebrow up, the other down. Both eyebrows up might signify surprise as well as doubt.

Eyes – looking to one side, or possibly upwards

Forehead – possibly creased

Mouth – pulled slightly to one side; or possibly opening and closing like a fish

Voice - hesitant

Body and Posture

Feet – shuffling

Hands – perhaps stroking the chin; sometimes hands out in front, palms facing out

Head – possibly tilted to one side

General

Playing with items of clothing (pulling, tugging at sleeve etc.)



Facial Expressions

Eyes – blinking can be common; but the opposite might also be true if the person is trying to conceal their excitement (i.e. a poker player with a good hand); opened wide; possibly focused on an object of interest or darting around if distracted by multiple objects of interest; possibly crying happy tears

Eyebrows – possibly raised

Mouth – open; or smiling widely; constantly licking lips or pursing lips

Voice – speaking faster than usual; a slightly higher pitch than usual; squealing; laughing; screaming

Body and Posture

Arms – uncrossed; possibly waving about; possibly clumsy in their excitement; never crossed or on hips for long periods (unless, trying to control their excitement); clapping hands together

Back – straight; standing up tall

Hands – busy; possibly fingers splayed; talking with hands

Head – tilted head if listening intently

Legs – possibly hopping from one foot to the other; or if sitting, perhaps cross-legged, one leg bouncing off the other

Position – feet pointed inwards; body facing object of interest

Posture – leaning forwards

General

Nodding enthusiastically

Possibly unable to sit still; fidgeting with nearby objects

Boundless energy; bouncing around; gesturing wildly

Grabbing on to others and even shaking them around

Takes up more space than usual



FRUSTRATED

Facial Expressions

Eyes – possibly squinting

Eyebrows – possibly knitted together

Mouth – biting lip; grimacing; perhaps a false smile

Nose – flared nostrils; possibly breathing a little more heavily than usual

Voice – curt answers to questions; short sentences

Body and Posture

Hands – possibly clenched; scratching back of neck; or rubbing neck from behind; scratching back of one hand with another; scratching a nail over their jaw; tapping hands against lap; drumming fingers; perhaps gesturing for a speaker to get to the point (windmill gesture)

Head – possibly turned away from object of their frustration

Legs – shaking foot in a gesture that might look like nerves; kicking out at objects on the ground

Muscles – tensed up



HAPPY

Facial Expressions

Eyes – open and wide; makes eye contact

Eyebrows – raised, face generally beaming

Mouth – smiling, upturned lips; open mouth, showing teeth in a full smile

Skin – perhaps slightly heightened colour; possibly sweat

Voice – fast talking, talking more; laughter; modulation in voice from high to low, expressive; contentment might lead to a slightly lower voice, regular breathing; whistling or humming or singing

Body and Posture

Arms – thrown wide, possibly lots of gestures; possibly folded behind the head

Back – straight, standing tall

Hands – open palms

Head – looking up, engaged with the world;

Legs – slightly spread apart

Posture – perhaps like a weight has been lifted away; confident posture; perhaps propping head up on one hand and gazing tenderly at something; perhaps leaning back

Shoulders – relaxed

General

Energy; jumping up and down; dancing; tapping feet; playful behaviour – punching others playfully on the arm; twisting or bouncing about

Sometimes, joy might express itself in slightly contradictory ways – one arm relaxed, the other tight

Happy screaming

More likely to touch others, wanting to build connections

Walks faster than usual; skipping or even running; walking with more bounce than usual



Facial Expressions

Eyes – glancing elsewhere (especially at exits / clock); wide eyes (perhaps slightly unfocused)

Eyebrows – possibly raised

Mouth – perhaps bunched up to the side; perhaps yawning; perhaps blowing out cheeks; perhaps sighing

Voice – talking fast, talking over others, talking loudly

Body and Posture

Hands – perhaps gesturing for a speaker to get to the point (windmill gesture); perhaps fidgeting; perhaps tapping fingers against thigh; perhaps clenching into fists; gathering up possessions in order to move onto the next thing at the soonest possible moment

Head – perhaps nodding; tilting their head

Position – turning away from speaker



Facial Expressions

Eyes – maintains eye contact with the object of their interest; eyes wide open; unbroken gaze

Eyebrows – raised eyebrows

Mouth – perhaps biting a thumb; smiling

Voice – asking questions; listening rather than talking

Body and Posture

Arms – perhaps folded

Head – nodding head; perhaps chin resting on a fist; perhaps head tilted to one side

Legs – perhaps sat with legs crossed

Muscles – relaxed; comfortable

Position – body facing object of interest

Posture – sat up straight, shoulders back; or perhaps leaning in towards object of interest

General

Not completely aware of themselves / absorbed by the object of their interest; not completely aware of their surroundings.



IRRITATED

Facial Expressions

Expression – generally quite pinched-in

Eyes – narrowed eyes; perhaps rolling eyes; avoiding direct eye contact

Forehead – rubbing forehead, possibly with the knuckle of their thumb, circling a knuckle around their temple

Mouth – perhaps biting lower lip

Nose – breathing in loudly through nose

Voice – exasperation expressed through sighing / huffing; short, curt replies to questions, use of dismissive phrases; interrupting / over-speaking

Body and Posture

Arms – crossed arms

Feet – foot-tapping

Hands – making fists or claws; raking fingernails down neck; perhaps with their fist near their mouth, possibly biting down on it

Head – tilting back head

Muscles – tense

Posture – possibly quite a rigid posture



NERVOUS

Facial Expressions

Breathing – faster than usual or irregular; perhaps making an effort to take long, deep breaths

Eyes – wandering, blinking; avoids making eye contact; looking at the floor, at surroundings

Mouth – biting a thumb, knuckle or lip

Nose – nostrils flared

Voice – speaking faster than usual, tripping over words; possibly trembling; possibly humming in order to control tension

Body and Posture

Hands – drumming fingers, fidgeting with clothing, peeling labels off drinks bottle, picking up nearby objects and rearranging; perhaps sweaty palms; men might hold hands together in front of crotch; to control tension, they might run a hand through their hair or rub the back of their neck

Heart – racing or irregular

Muscles – shaking legs or arms

Posture – can't stay still; fidgeting; maintains greater area of personal space than usual, hesitating to go close to others and shrinking away when others come near; might position something physical between them and others

Posture – slouching, hunching; maybe rocking back and forth

General

Jumping at unexpected noises or movements; perhaps pent-up energy

Might be trembling

Might become more aggressive, snapping in response to questions

Weight on one leg; unbalanced

Rocking body



PATIENT

Facial Expressions

Eyes – maintaining eye contact

Mouth – smiling

Voice – talking in a normal voice; perhaps even slower than usual; listening rather than interrupting

Body and Posture

Hands – perhaps hands clasped in lap

Legs – if standing, feet planted slightly apart; if sat, perhaps legs crossed

Muscles – relaxed

Position – upright posture

Posture – turned fully towards speaker



PENSIVE

Facial Expressions

Eyes – perhaps closed in deep thought

Eyebrows – possibly furrowed

Mouth – pressed together; possibly biting lower lip; possibly mouth in a small O shape

Nose – slightly flared

Voice – dreamlike; slightly absent if lost in thought

Body and Posture

Hands – scratching chin; steepling fingers; tugging an earlobe

Head – resting on the palm of a hand; possibly tilted to one side

Posture – leaning back, looking upwards (perhaps looking for inspiration)



SAD

Facial Expressions

Breathing – slow and deep

Cheeks – sagging

Eyes – slightly unfocussed; misting over, blinking back tears, crying; eyes screwed shut; gazing down at the ground

Eyelids – drooping eyelids

Forehead – furrowed

Mouth – bottom lip jutting out; sucking lips inwards; lip quivering; unsmiling / frowning; audible swallowing, more frequent swallowing

Skin – red or flushed

Voice – flat speech tone; slow, laboured speech; possibly quite quiet; sobbing / crying

Body and Posture

Arms – hanging by sides; possibly hugging themselves for comfort

Hands – clenched fists; wringing hands

Head – hanging head; covering head with hands; possibly resting forehead on a fist / the palm of a hand

Legs – perhaps one leg bent, one straight if standing; if sat, possibly pushed together

Muscles – lack of muscle tension

Position – turning / twisting away from others

Posture – drooping body; hunched, almost folding in on themselves

Shoulders – slumped / drooping

General

Hesitant movements; dragging their feet as they walk

Shaking

Perhaps long periods of lethargy / motionless



Facial Expressions

Ears – possibly tugging at an earlobe

Eyes – not making eye contact, looking away; looking down; rubbing eyes

Forehead – tension in forehead

General – perhaps a neutral expression; a mask over the face (if concealing true feelings)

Jaw – tightened jaw muscles

Mouth – tension in facial expression; possibly tight-lipped, biting lip to physically stop themselves saying something

Nose – touching / itching their nose

Voice – possibly higher pitched than normal; possible hesitations

Body and Posture

Hands – possibly in pockets or behind back; possibly covering face / mouth; stroking chin

Heart – possibly faster than normal if caught in the act of lying

Muscles – general tension

Position – closed-off; not openly facing others



Facial Expressions

Eyes – looking down; not making direct eye contact

Eyelids – fluttering

Mouth – nervous smile; perhaps lips sucked inwards; biting a fingernail or pen

Skin – blushing

Voice – hesitant; higher pitched than normal

Body and Posture

Arms – folded arms (defensive body language)

Hands – possibly covering face with hands; possibly wringing hands on lap; fiddling with objects, hair etc.

Head – possibly bowed, looking down

Heart – racing

Legs – crossed legs when sitting; legs pressed together; one leg bent

Muscles – tense

Position – keeping distance, backing away

Posture – making themselves small, not wanting to be noticed



Facial Expressions

Chin – lifting chin, tilting back head

Eyes – direct eye contact, wide open eyes; perhaps rolling eyes (dismissive)

Eyebrows – possibly raised

Hair – perhaps tossing hair back

Mouth – perhaps sneering; perhaps a closed-lip smile

Nose – literally looking down their nose at others

Voice – perhaps speaking slowly for emphasis; loud speaking voice; talking over others; laughter; perhaps sighing contentedly

Body and Posture

Back – straight back; perhaps chest pushed out

Hands – perhaps a dismissive wave; steepling fingers

Head – tilted back

Legs – wide open stance (either sat or standing); or possibly crossed (when sat) in a casual manner

Muscles – relaxed

Neck – stretching out neck

Posture – possibly quite casual, at ease

Shoulders – possibly rolling back

General

Walking with a bit of a swagger

Making themselves seem noticed, bringing attention to themselves

Perhaps overly familiar

Perhaps patting others on the head in a condescending fashion



Facial Expressions

Eyes – wide; possibly blinking

Eyebrows – raised (not drawn together)

Forehead – creased

Jaw – dropped

Mouth – hanging open; or pinched inwards into a tight O; a good surprise would normally involve a smile / showing of teeth; a bad surprise would normally not involve teeth being shown

Skin – possibly tingling sensation; goosebumps

Voice – gasp; intake of breath; use of questions, pitch up and down; possibly hesitant, disbelieving; possibly laughter

Body and Posture

Hand – holding hand(s) to cheek(s) or throat

Head – possibly leaning forwards

Position – stepping away from object of surprise

Stomach – somersault; or heaviness in pit of stomach (if a bad surprise)

General

Possibly a feeling of dizziness



SUSPICIOUS

Facial Expressions

Eyes – narrowed; possibly sideways glances; possibly rubbing eyes (in disbelief)

Eyebrows – knitted together; or possibly raised (sceptical)

Face – frowning

Mouth – twisted; perhaps biting lower lip; tight lips; pouting

Nose – perhaps crinkled to the side

Body and Posture

Hands – perhaps unintentionally clenched; perhaps stroking chin; open palms face up (weighing a suspicious thought / idea)

Head – tilted; head shaking

Posture – might lean forwards (in order to inspect object of suspicion)



UNCOMFORTABLE

Facial Expressions

Eyes – lack of eye contact; shifting eye contact; increased rate of blinking

Mouth – gulping; perhaps chewing a pen / biting a fingernail

Skin – perhaps blushing

Voice – talking quietly; perhaps rushing / tripping over their words; short answers; slightly higher pitched than usual; nervous laughter

Body and Posture

Arms – crossed arms

Hands – scratching; clenching / unclenching fists; playing with hair / fiddling with objects in front of them

Head – glancing away; head looking down / away from the object of their discomfort; chin tucked into their throat

Heart – faster heart rate than usual

Legs – crossed legs; knees drawn together; feet bouncing

Muscles – tense

Neck – possible neck rubbing (self-soothing gesture)

Position – angling body away from the object of their discomfort; angling towards door / point of escape; backing away from object of their discomfort

Posture – perhaps hunched

Shoulders – raised shoulders

General

Keeping distance from object of their discomfort

Flinching / wincing



ENDNOTE

Bio:

This resource has been created by Matt Kendrick. Matt is a writer, editor and teacher based in the East Midlands, UK. His short fiction has been widely published both online and in print. He has been placed or listed in various writing competitions including Bath, Flash 500, the Oxford Flash Fiction Prize, Reflex and Leicester Writes. His work has been included on the Biffy 50 list for 2019-20, in Best Microfiction 2021, Best Small Fictions 2022 and the Wigleaf Top 50 list for 2022. He has also been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

Other Resources:

For links to other free resources, please visit my website: <https://www.mattkendrick.co.uk/resources>

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